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The crime of the century

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The plot to murder the pope has frequently been called, with much justification, the crime of the century. The puzzling thing about it from the start has been the reluctance of the Western media to recognize what was staring them in the face, and the entire failure of the U.S. government to exploit the crime for purposes of political warfare throughout the Catholic world.

With a few honorable exceptions, Western media downplayed the crime and the accumulating evidence that pointed to its political and international character.

The New York Times first assured its readers that Mehmet Agca appeared to have acted alone. Then, when the Bulgarian connection surfaced, opined editorially that some loose-cannon zealots in the Bulgarian secret service were probably acting on their own — a proposition that anyone familiar with the relationship of the Bulgarian secret service to the KGB would find stupefyingly ridiculous.

Clare Sterling, Bernard Kalb, John Wallach, and a few others laid out the facts and their meaning in public. Nevertheless, a peculiar silence continued to surround the story.

From the start, our diplomats and CIA people have discounted the idea of a conspiracy — even as Judge Martella, a universally admired Italian jurist, meticulously assembled the evidence. I myself was told directly by a high CIA official that the agency had no reason to believe there had been a conspiracy.

And, certainly, we have not used the plot against the pope to damage the Communists in Latin America, for example. The impact there of a widely circulated documentary film on the matter would be politically devastating to the Soviets and their local allies, but we have done nothing of the kind. The explanation remains mysterious.

My colleague and friend William Safire writes in his column that the media hung back as long as Yuri Andropov was the Soviet leader. He reasons that the implications of the plot were just too horrifying. Any scheme that momentous would have to have had the approval of the Politburo, which means Leonid Brezhnev, Yuri Andropov and the others; and Yuri Andropov, who at the time of the murder attempt headed the KGB, would have been the man who ran the show directly.

Mr. Safire thinks that the media ignored, or mostly ignored the story because, with the elevation of Mr. Andropov, the need to do business with the chief hit man himself was just too horrifying. Now that Mr. Andropov is gone, everything has changed. Mr. Gorbachev can say "Not Me." The media people are flocking to the trial.

There may be something to that analysis, but it does not seem to me to go far enough.

Now that the trial is receiving media attention, the crime of the century still is not being seen as a spectacular revelation of the Soviet mentality and the Soviet system itself. The assassination attempt is of a piece with the shooting down of the Korean Airliner 007, with the regular murders at the Berlin Wall, with the Gulag.

The shooting of the pope was yet another revelation about a system that is based upon the normalization of sheer brutality, a system that knows no restraint upon such brutality.

Perhaps that recognition is also too painful for the U.S. government itself to face, and hence its failure to exploit the assassination attempt as a weapon of political warfare. The pertinent policy-makers, certainly at the State Department and perhaps including the White House, simply do not want to look directly into the heart of that darkness.

To a certain extent one sympathizes with them. Looking directly at it is indeed unpleasant, and it makes it repellent to do business with the Soviets. We do business with them at all levels, including Geneva and the projected Summit for which the president yearns. We preserve the civilities, and turn away from the heart of darkness.

But it would be much healthier in the long run if we faced the double truths: that on some questions our self-interest requires that we do business with the Soviets, but, equally true, that the very system we are dealing with is murderous in its essence.

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